

Philadelphia, PA – In a meeting with leaders at the Philadelphia VA Medical Center, including the Executive Director, Congressman Joe Sestak (PA-07) discussed the ways and means necessary to see that returning Veterans would receive the medical treatment they earned. He cited a recent example of a Veteran's case his District Office handled. In this particular instance, a service member was discharged from the military with mental health problems that eventually contributed to his homelessness, adding to the startling proportion of Veterans among the homeless population, more than 25 percent. —

“Having reviewed this case, I am interested in establishing how this happened so that we can avoid repeating the mistakes that caused so many of our Vietnam-era Veterans to struggle with finding their rightful place in our society,” said Congressman Sestak. “I am convinced that we need a seamless process to transition our service members from the military through the VA and into civilian life, with the opportunity for a job, education and the benefits they have earned.”

With many Veterans initiatives needed to build on the successes of the 110th Congress, which presided over the largest increase in VA funding in the agency's history, the Congressman stressed the need to make certain that those who served our nation would leave the military assured that the proper health benefits, education assistance and job opportunities were in place. The meeting followed an August visit to the VA that focused on work being done for returning Veterans with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and discussions about additional measures that need to be taken to improve transportation for elderly and disabled veterans.

“As we move into 2009, I want to work as a partner with the VA and Gen. Eric K. Shinseki, the next Secretary of the Department of Veterans Affairs. The General is ideally suited to engage the many issues that confront the VA. He was a ‘Soldiers’ Soldier’ and is now a Veterans’ Veteran,” said Congressman Sestak. “A significant purpose of this meeting was to ensure that we are on the same page in the Greater Delaware Valley in determining ways to measure success, as well as legislation and community programs needed to provide Veterans the aid they need and deserve. As evidenced by the current case of a homeless Veteran receiving help from my office, the system requires improvements. Veterans should experience a seamless transition from leaving active duty to receiving inpatient and outpatient care – after a thorough diagnosis – and a timely processing of claims.”

One necessary legislative change required to meet the objective of providing necessary assistance involves benefits for Veterans in two categories: Priority 7, representing Veterans

whose injuries are not service-related and whose income is more than approximately \$28,000, but less than 80 percent of the community's median income; and Priority 8, representing Veterans whose injuries are not service related and whose incomes are higher than Priority 7 Veterans. Since 2000, the number of uninsured Veterans has increased by more than 235,000, to 1.8 million nationwide. Many of these Veterans were prevented from receiving care through the Veterans Administration (VA) health system because of policies enacted in 2003 when the Administration began banning so-called "Priority 8" Veterans from the VA health system. However, while Priority 8 veterans' incomes are deemed too high to qualify for VA health care by the Administration, they are often too low for the veterans to purchase private health insurance. The Congressman proposed legislation to reverse the 2003 directive.

"It is far past time to end the sort of decision-making observed in 2003. That policy unfairly disqualified many Veterans from receiving help owed to them," said Congressman Sestak. "Reversing this policy must be part of a restoration of a bipartisan, accountable and transparent approach to the way we take care of the men and women who serve our nation and, just as importantly, their families."

An important step was taken to offering more resources to Veterans in the Fiscal Year 2009 Military Construction-VA that the Congressman helped pass. The bill appropriated a total of \$118.9 billion, with \$41 billion for Veterans' Affairs health programs, \$4.1 billion (10%) more than the current level and \$1.8 billion (5%) more than the Administration's request. In addition, the bill provided \$31 billion for Veterans' medical services, which was \$2.9 billion (9%) more than the current level and \$1.2 billion (3%) more than the administration's request. The Veterans' health appropriation also included \$4.5 billion for medical administration, \$388 million (8%) more than the current level, and \$244 million (3%) more than the request; \$5 billion for medical facilities, \$769 million (18%) more than the current level and \$368 million (8%) more than the administration's request; and \$510 million for medical and prosthetic research, \$30 million (4%) more than the current level, and \$68 million (13%) more than the administration's request.

Born and raised in Delaware County, former 3-star Admiral Joe Sestak served in the Navy for 31 years and now serves as the Representative from the 7th District of Pennsylvania. He led a series of operational commands at sea, including Commander of an aircraft carrier battle group of 30 U.S. and allied ships with over 15,000 sailors and 100 aircraft that conducted operations in Afghanistan and Iraq. After 9/11, Joe was the first Director of "Deep Blue," the Navy's anti-terrorism unit that established strategic and operations policies for the "Global War on Terrorism." He served as President Clinton's Director for Defense Policy at the National Security Council in the White House, and holds a Ph.D. in Political Economy and Government from Harvard University. According to the office of the House Historian, Joe is the highest-ranking former military officer ever elected to the Congress.

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